

Violence at work: it's not part of the job

a UNISON guide for members



Introduction

Every year, in England and Wales alone, approximately 350,000 workers are assaulted for simply doing their job (Crime Survey for England and Wales 2015/16).

UNISON believes this is unacceptable and so we are campaigning for tougher legislation for anyone who assaults public service staff. We also believe that employers should be doing more to prevent these attacks occurring. This booklet will help you understand the main issues and how they affect you, together with what your employer should be doing to protect and support you and what you can do to keep you and your colleagues safe.

How does violence at work affect me?

Violence at work involves any incident in which an employee is abused, threatened or assaulted (either physically or verbally) in circumstances relating to their work. In some cases this can result in serious injury, and in the worst cases, death. Such cases are rare (although even the few that do occur are too many) but even things considered to be “minor” assaults (especially when they happen over a period of time), can lead to unforeseen consequences such as depression, anxiety, reduced morale and increased sickness absence.

What is UNISON doing?

UNISON has consistently called for a zero-tolerance approach to violence at work. This means we expect employers to make it clear that violence from anyone is not acceptable behaviour and is not part of the job. UNISON has campaigned for a robust approach to prosecuting the culprits, and tougher legislation that makes assaulting a public service worker an aggravated offence.

What is my employer required to do?

Your employer has a duty to risk assess all reasonably foreseeable hazards, and then put in place reasonably practicable measures, to keep you safe. They are required to keep a written record of what they have done to keep you safe, and failure to do so could put them in breach of the law.

Violence at work is a potential hazard for anyone whose work involves working with the public. However, the likelihood of it happening and its consequences would depend on the job you do and the environment in which you work, taking into account for example whether you work alone in isolated places or come into contact with people who have a history of violent behaviour. The more likely you are to be attacked, the more time and trouble your employer would be expected to spend on stopping it happening. Measures your employer could take to prevent you being attacked could include:

- Preventing you from having to carry cash or expensive equipment;

- Moving community-based jobs to more secure environments;
- Making sure you keep a record of where you will be, and encouraging you to keep in touch with colleagues
- Changing the public areas you work in to make them less confrontational, through lighting, arrangement/ comfort of seating and elimination of long queues. However, in some cases it may be necessary to add physical barriers such as perspex screens.
- Providing you with training so that you can manage situations safely. This includes the use of any equipment required to keep you safe, such as personal alarms.

What can I personally do to keep myself safe?

Your employer is ultimately legally responsible for your, as well as your colleagues', safety at work. However there are still things you can do to improve your personal safety. These include:

- complying with all reasonable instructions from your employer and attending any training provided by them regarding your health, safety and security
- letting someone know where you will be going and staying in touch with your colleagues especially if you are working alone
- avoiding getting involved in potentially violent situations that you are not trained, or unable, to manage

- speaking to your local safety or trade union rep if there is anything more your employer should be doing to keep you safe
- joining UNISON if you are not already a member
- becoming more active in UNISON, for example why not consider becoming a safety rep. You will get all the training you need from UNISON so why not give it some thought. Find out more at www.unison.org.uk/get-involved/

What sort of support should I expect if I am attacked?

Immediately after the assault the employer/manager should:

1. check that the person who attacked you, assuming they have not left the scene, has been restrained and removed
2. have you medically assessed to see if you are OK and whether/what treatment is required
3. check whether you need to go home or have a short break. If you do need to go home, they should check whether you need additional support, such as being accompanied by, or a lift home with, a colleague.

As soon as possible your employer/manager should also:

1. make sure someone talks to you and records the details of the incident, including any lessons that will make it less likely you or your colleagues are attacked again

2. provide additional support such as:

- an appointment with occupational health;
- access to counselling;
- change of duties;
- a chat with your manager/colleague to see whether you are OK.

Can I expect the attackers to face criminal charges?

UNISON has campaigned for many years for tougher legislation and sentencing against those who attack or abuse public service staff. However, there will be situations where, for various reasons, when neither the police nor your employer will press charges. Sometimes this is with the agreement of staff and the unions. If you believe your employer or police have been too lenient speak to your local UNISON safety rep or steward. Even where criminal action is not possible there are still sanctions employers can use, such as withdrawal of services, to deter potential attackers.

When should the police become involved?

The police will obviously be involved when criminal charges are pursued. However, in many situations the police will expect employers to manage incidents themselves, and even in some cases hire/appoint security staff with specialist training. The actions the police would expect an employer to take before contacting them would depend on the risks and hazards identified through the risk assessments as described in this leaflet. Ultimately the police would normally be expected to respond where there is a threat of serious injury or loss of life.

Where can I find out more?

Go to our health and safety knowledge pages at unison.org.uk/safety

Alternatively read some of our guides available from UNISON online catalogue (unison.org.uk/catalogue)

- Are you at risk? – booklet for members explaining risk assessment (stock number 2720).
- It's not part of the job: a health and safety guide for safety reps on tackling violence at work (stock number 1346).

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